

tryin' to keep it cool by xxcaribbean

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Summary:

a small au in which billy's a firefighter.

1. Accidents

Author's Note:

so initially, i posted this small ficlet amongst my drabbles, but i went and wrote a part two and thought it'd be a good idea just to combine them since they're in the same universe.

basically this started from a prompt i made about steve burning dinner and billy being the firefighter on call.

then it progressed to another prompt by a lovely anon with: what IF Steve goes to make them cookies as a thanks/apology and he sets off his smoke detector AGAIN and then billy has to come back and steve is all flustered trying to explain why there's smoke flooding his kitchenette and Billy's all "you know you don't have to burn down your apartment just to see me"

Steve knows that his oven and the rest of his kitchen *shouldn't* billow with smoke clouds, but he guesses it's the price he pays for clearly dealing with a faulty timer. He knew, for sure, he shouldn't've trusted the buttons on the microwave. The thing is senile and a little wonky sometimes, but Steve's lived in this apartment for so long, it's second nature to click a button, watch the numbers count down and hope that it beeps before anything burns.

And god, did his cookies *burn*.

It's a sign, maybe, that steve is to prepare for a future in embarrassment because that's what he feels deep in his bones after he's opened all the windows, turned on the ceiling fan, and done his best to ignore the knocking on the door before the insistent pounding let him know that *no*, he was not escaping another round of witnesses.

Steve opens the door to a very concerned firefighter, blonde and

blue-eyed, who gently nudges Steve out of the way as he takes one step into the apartment, assessing the situation, and gathering the courage to step into what's left of the cloud of smoke that's dissipated, if only somewhat.

"Nothing caught on fire," he says meekly, ignoring the other firefighter standing in the doorway who was clearly here last time and is in no way impressed. That's definitely not the best attitude to have when called out for a potential fire, but then again, he's probably well aware of how much of a dumb-ass Steve is - which just means that he's wasting their time *again*. "I'm sorry about this."

The firefighter in his apartment taps a button on the microwave, a fan whirring to life; Steve grimaces because he'd forgotten about that, too.

Fuck, he really is all over the place today.

"I was just trying to bake cookies," he explains when he meets the firefighter half way once he's finished his inspection. Luckily, there hadn't been a fire, and Steve's grateful for that, but what he's not grateful for is the amused smile on this man's face. Steve already feels ridiculous, and this guy isn't helping.

Especially when he opens his mouth and says, "For who? The devil. I'm sure he likes them burnt."

Caught between a laugh and a grimace, Steve crosses his arms and bites the corner of his bottom lip to keep from laughing nervously. "Fair point," he says, blinking up at a pretty face who's smile has settled for fond, the crinkles at the corner of his eyes a dead giveaway that he's not mad about a false alarm unlike his partner shuffling in the hallway. "But no." Steve shakes his head, waving his hand absentmindedly towards the kitchen, the very room that's suffered enough inhalation for a lifetime. "For the last time."

An attempt at the casual falls through the seams like liquid, voice small and cracked. Steve hadn't exactly planned on telling this man, or anyone else for that matter, that the cookies were for the hassle the last time they'd been called out. But it's out there now, a gesture, in hindsight, he thinks looks a little ridiculous.

"You know," comes a voice, wafting through Steve's thoughts, drawing his attention directly to this stranger's mouth. His lips are pretty and pink, white teeth, and the most gorgeous blue eyes Steve has ever seen, fanned by long, thick lashes. He attempts to listen, knows he'd been a sputtering mess when he'd opened his door the last time in nothing but sweatpants and a t-shirt. He hadn't been ready for visitors, and his hair certainly looked like a rat's nest.

Not that that ever should've been the main priority when his apartment coughed up black fumes, but *still*. It's the principle of it all.

Either way, Steve shuffles on his feet as the man continues and proceeds to pull the rug out from underneath him.

"You don't *have* to burn down your apartment just to see me."

Steve's eyes go wide, takes in the smirk that slowly slides across the firefighter's face. "I-" he tries, blushing red at the implication, at the audacity, at the *flutter* of dumbfounded astonishment. "That's not- *I wasn't*-" because Steve really, *really* wasn't trying to cause a plight. Rather, he'd been hoping to do something nice without it backfiring so miserably. So, *so what* if he'd thought about this man after he'd left; that didn't have to mean anything. "It was just-" but Steve knows the truth, and lying to himself does him no favors, shoulders falling with worry etched into his brow.

"I'm off shift tomorrow night," the firefighter interrupts, half decent enough to shrug as an apology. He looks hopeful next to that, eyes roaming Steve's face, deep and familiar like before when he'd told Steve that he should be more careful.

Clearly, Steve hadn't heeded that advice, but it's definitely landed him in peculiarities and whatever the hell is going on right now.

"The cookies off eighth street are damn good, by the way," the man continues, licking his lips. Steve could probably guess that it's in anticipation - though the root of the cause defies Steve even though he has many a guess. Presumptions have never been his forte, and Steve's already had enough mortification for his liking. "Only if you're still looking to impress."

"You want me to come by tomorrow?" Steve says, spells it out plainly because he doesn't have time for misunderstandings, let alone for extremely handsome firefighters that insist on being the one to open his door, reveling in his failures, and looking at him like *that*.

"For dinner," the firefighter says with a wink, quick but full of confidence. "Without smoke, might I add."

Steve huffs a laugh, running his fingers through his hair. "But with desert," he affixes for good measure, the full scope of being asked out a pleasant thrum throughout his body. "And not made for the devil."

This time, Steve watches the man duck his head and snicker at his feeble attempt at a joke. but it makes Steve feel funny, the kind he tends to get when he's nervously excited, full of butterflies and hopefulness he knows he probably shouldn't have.

"I don't know; he might just be named Billy."

"Billy," Steve softly repeats, rolling the name off his tongue like it could be an added, permanent fixture in the future. It might be nonsensical to think as such, but Steve had wondered before, hadn't the chance to grab a name as a more appropriate *thank you* for how careful and considerate Billy had been for the inconvenience of a false alarm. "Thank you," he finally tacks on, feels the relief of doing the appropriate dance across his shoulders.

They stare for a moment, if only that, Steve foregoing the other end of pleasantries as he's stuck on Billy's gaze. It may be a good thing when the disruption comes in the form of a cleared throat.

"We should get going."

It startles billy, too, blinking away from steve. He watches as seriousness takes over, almost like the mask of transparency slid from view because it was solely for Steve. That, in and of itself, makes him bite the inside of his cheek, awareness blooming across the expanse of his mind. "Steve," he says as introduction, though it's clear they hardly need anything else past that. He's quick, though, can't let Billy leave without it in return. "You already know where I live, so—"

“I’ll see you at seven,” he offers, that smile back on Billy’s face, if only for a moment. He reaches forward with careful consideration, squeezes Steve’s wrist before letting go, then brushes past his shoulder for the front door.

Steve watches him leave, trailing behind his partner in a bulky, off-yellow uniform while wondering how the fuck something so bad turned into something so promising.

2. Incidents

Notes for the Chapter:

i did not research what a hospital call is like even though i should've. i was way too lazy for that, and the realism probably wouldn't fit into the angst i wrote. so, here it is anyway, lol.

Stuttering intuition is what wakes Steve in the middle of the night, long before the phone disturbs his slumber. He's bleary-eyed, half mumbling a litany of *I'm coming, I'm coming* as if the person on the other end of line might be able to hear him.

The trill comes again, louder this time as Steve approaches the source of contention. It's late, he knows, because there's something eerie about the apartment during the night. Not as if he's afraid of his home, but there's always a distinct difference between the hours. Steve doesn't know how he can tell, probably trained his body, his subconscious after years of monster hunts, after witnessing his fair share of sunrises, to know that it's late. It's late, and he should be in bed instead of standing in a pair of sweats, toes covered in socks that don't keep his feet warm and a cold phone pressed to his ear as he says, "Hello?"

Someone clears their throat, light and airy and for a minute, Steve thinks it's Nancy. Thinks maybe she's called him because after so many years, their nightmares – *real* nightmares come to life and born out of things unknown - might be knocking on every door back in Hawkins. The rustling and chatter in the background give clear indication that this call is far from his small-town home, though, residing somewhere deep in Chicago.

"Mr. Harrington?"

Immediately, Steve's on alert. Not as if he wasn't before because the possibility of *that* world on the cusp of reckoning is always a possibility, but this is different. This is different in the sense that Steve's intuition had woken him up long before the phone, and he hadn't known why, but now he thinks he's got some semblance of

where this is going.

“Yes,” he says, voice tinged with sleep, though he doesn’t think it’s very fair for that to show itself off. Steve’s had late shifts before, has worked night shifts for an extra inkling of money to cover rent, thankful there were any additional hours to begin with. The woman on the other end of the line has most likely gotten used to her schedule, knows that someone has to do it and chose her job because it might’ve filled a purpose she’d realized she had.

Though Steve doesn’t think this is the kind of the thing she signed up for. Hell, it’s not exactly the thing Steve signed up for either.

“You’re an emergency contact for Mr. Hargrove, correct?” comes the voice through the other end of the line, a little tinny but soft, and Steve doesn’t process the question until he’s rolled around a counter question in his mind: how many times has she done this today?

Steve breathes, doesn’t want to think about the consequences of not answering or what it means if he does answer because he’s not exactly sure when his heart leapt all the way up into his throat or if it’d already been there to begin with. He’s not- Steve’s not *surprised* by this call, knew there’d come a day when he’d receive one, and he thinks maybe he’s a little in shock? Dismay? That it’s here for the first time since Billy and he started dating. “Yes,” he manages, voice tight underneath the twist in his stomach, from the dread creeping through his veins. “Yes, I am.”

There’s a pause, some papers shuffling, and Steve grinds his teeth because the wait is too long for this, too long between the point of knowing and not knowing whether Steve’s going to have to face another death. Only this time, it’ll be the cause of human error and not because of a gap between worlds.

“There was an incident with Mr. Hargrove,” the woman says, Steve realizing she hasn’t introduced herself, wonders if she’d forgone the hospital name, her area of work because she’d been caught off guard by delivering unpleasant- *inconvenient* news. “I think it’s best you come in straight away.”

Steve doesn’t register the bile in his throat or the way his hand

shakes as he runs it through his hair. What he does notice is written in between the lines of her cryptic message, that she's sorry, that she doesn't want to be the bearer of bad news, that she can't tell him much more because it isn't protocol- because Steve isn't *family*.

He doesn't choke, and Steve doesn't sob into his hand when he bites the back of it, tears licking at the corner of his eyes because goddamn Billy Hargrove for making a fool out of him. "Sure," he replies, knows it comes out a lot more wet than he'd intended. "I'll be there shortly."

And then it's done. Final. No goodbye. No apology. Just a simple click that meets his ear, Steve left standing in the middle of his living room - of *their* living room – not knowing whether it'll be a place he shares with someone when he returns.

There's a fifty-fifty chance, and Steve's betting- he's *praying* that this time, he makes the right call.

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There's no one at the front desk when Steve arrives, and he thinks, bitterly, that it's fucked up because Steve didn't half-ass his outfit, slip into his shoes and grab his keys at fast as he could, only to be greeted with silence when his boyfriend's life is hanging in the balance.

Steve's frothing at the teeth with worry, had only learned to sleep alone in recent months because of Billy's job, knew he had to share him with civic duty and Billy's desire to be helpful. So, it's not like they hadn't talked about this, about a day that might come where Billy wouldn't come home. It'd been a difficult conversation to have, one that still jerks Steve around with fear if he lets it fester for too long. He'd worried when he'd found out about Hawkins and vines and gooey shit that stuck to fucking everything. He'd seen Joyce on the edge of her seat, jumpy and jittery because of the depth and heartbreak she'd been forced to bear, lucky that her son had come out unscathed.

Steve had thought he'd gotten used to it, but instead he'd traded that in for other worries that were just as promising, just as daunting as those back home.

He waits, and he waits, and he grabs the first nurse he sees – apologizing profusely for his grip around her wrist – but the panic in his eyes lets her know his reasoning. She shuffles around the station, fingers clacking over keys before pointing him in the right direction – down the hall, up three floors, to the right. The walls don't close in, but the sterile smell and clean, white walls are all too familiar.

Steve enters a waiting area, finds a group of people huddled around chairs. They're assembled in a u-shape, typical and against the long span of glass windows that look out over the city of Chicago. Everyone looks tired, weary with heads bowed, soot on their cheeks and heavy shoulders from the gear they'd pulled off their backs. "What the fuck happened," he croaks, catching everyone's attention.

He looks a mess; he knows he does because while he'd been asleep, something happened, and now he's here. He doesn't know anything, and he just wants answers. Hopes that maybe he'll have them, every morsel he can acquire to fill in the pieces he'd missed because he'd been at home, safely, peacefully while these men had not had that luxury.

"Come sit down, Steve," a voice calls, recognition immediate. It's Billy's chief, a burly man Billy had been intimidated of because of his size, because of his authority, but a man he'd quickly grown to like, even admire. He'd told Steve as much because of his past and his upbringing, that sometimes he still flinches, and sometimes loud noises set off his anxiety.

The only real thing Steve had promised him was understanding because Steve knew the inner workings of nerves all too well.

Steve walks around the chairs, simply obeys the request because it's clear that no one else is going to approach him. He sits down heavy in his seat, slumping into it until his coat is near his ears.

There's no way past this any of this, almost feels like a child again, being pulled back down by his mother's hand. Only this time, Steve doesn't feel burning anger yet, just worry and guilt and a slew of other things he's not sure he has the mental capacity to distinguish. "I got a call," he says, even though the lot of the crew knows. "They told me to come here."

Silence answers him, and he almost resents it, but he doesn't drag that out because the room is thick with everything but tension and the quiet mumblings of a reporter on the television.

Sitting up quickly, Steve almost loses his balance. The T.V. is perched in the corner near the ceiling, and he doesn't need the volume turned up to know what he's looking at. There'd been a fire, a large one if the replays are anything to go by. Before and after pictures flash across the screen, a building gone charred for reasons investigators are still searching for. Steve's fists' ball at his sides, feels the pinprick of tears at the corner of his eyes again. "You need to tell me what happened," he says, pointedly turning away from the images on screen to the sullen face of a man Steve's only met a handful of times.

"He's not-" but that's as far as the chief is able to take it, shaking his head like Steve knows what that means. "They took him in for surgery."

It's not enough. It's enough for Steve to close his eyes and breath in deeply, but it's not enough to settle the sick curiosity he has for details, for the potential trauma they all could've suffered tonight. Steve knows, just as well as Billy, that losing men in a fire is no one's fault, but the squad here are like family. They'd welcomed Steve easily, let him visit and bring food, let him into their lives like he'd belonged.

Billy means a lot to them just as he means a lot to Steve, and he recognizes the selfishness that's swallowed him whole. "Thank you," he says, as if he doesn't say it enough, as if he's remorseful enough to finally realize that he's not the only one in turmoil.

The chief shakes his head again, rests the palm of his hand against Steve's shoulder and says, "You've every right to worry, Steve," and he's not quite sure how a man can look like he's aged ten years in the span of what must be a few hours, but Steve knows that he probably looks just the same, "more than the rest of us."

The silence resumes, Steve partially grateful for that. The images on the television continue to rotate, circling around and around out of the corner of his eye, and Steve's tempted to look again because it's easier to be angry at something - curse the fuck out of those bright

orange flames for sending them here, for sending Billy here in the dead of the night when the squad was only trying to do their job - than it is to point accusatory fingers at anyone who doesn't deserve it.

Steve's hurting, but he likes to believe he can reign in his ability to lash out even though he knows how much easier it is just to give into it.

"Did everyone else make it?" he asks, attempts to swerve the conversation into something positive. At least, he hopes that's the case. Steve's not quite sure how much more rough news he can take.

"Everyone's accounted for," the chief replies. "Few victims inside were taken in for smoke inhalation, but everyone made it."

Which is good to hear, means the truck made it in time, means they put out the fire before it corrupted the entire foundation of the building. What it doesn't explain is how Billy ended up in a detrimental state. "How?" he counters because he ought to ask, should know how high the stakes were and who's call it was to send Billy back inside. Some small part of Steve wonders if he'd sweet-talked his way back inside, the daredevil, untouchable mindset that Billy emits sometimes.

"Had a woman with him," someone else answers. Steve follows the sound of the voice and finds Adam on the other end of it. "They were coming down the stairs, and he'd noticed it was going to give out. She made it in time."

But he didn't Steve's mind finishes for him, pictures it in his head while understanding that nothing he could conjure would equate to the reality of what actually happened. The risks were always there, no matter the threat level, and Chicago is a big city filled with old buildings and even clumsier neighbors. Steve doesn't want to be upset about it, fights the knee-jerk reaction now that the humility has passed over.

Not much later, he's offered coffee. It's disgusting and probably from down the hall rather than the cafeteria, but Steve drinks it anyway because tired is in his bones, all over his body, and he thinks if he

doesn't bounce his leg or run his fingers through his hair, he'll pass out in his chair. And Steve doesn't want that. He'd rather sit in silence and regret, think of all the things he said and didn't, wait for the news even though his body aches and his head is beginning to hurt.

Time passes so slowly from there on out, no news, no estimate on how long Billy's meant to be in surgery. None of them know the extent of his injuries, but it must be gruesome enough to warrant the ticking clock and Steve's frustrations.

Steve's curled up in his chair as best as he can fit into it by the time anything changes, when someone clears their throat, and he looks up into the face of a doctor. Removing himself from his seat, Steve approaches, feels like walking into a trap as every footfall echoes across the room. He hears everyone shifting in their seat, no one else standing while Steve takes the role of sole gatherer of any update that might preclude further anguish.

"Are you family?"

To say he'd been expecting it is an understatement, but it still hurts, that question. Steve doesn't want to be denied anything if he answers incorrectly, so he shrugs and says, "Yes," because Steve's the only person outside of the squad that Billy knows. His sister, Max, lives far outside of the city, and Steve knows he'll have to call her soon.

The doctor breathes deeply, nods and stares at Steve without averting his eyes. It's a gesture of honesty, a task he does on the daily, though Steve hopes the end result isn't always grave. He waits, but doesn't wait for too long, gets his answer on the wings of certainty. "He's stable," the doctor says. "He should recover nicely, but he'll be here for a few days."

Steve releases his breath, tames the corner of his mouth no matter how much he wants to smile at the news. He's allowed that, to feel relief, to feel joy, but Steve thinks he's lived long enough to know that there's always a catch.

It does come. It comes in the form of technical, medical terms Steve doesn't comprehend. He makes out *shoulder* and *fractured* and *skin*

graft before losing the rest of the sentence to, “You can see him, but he’ll probably be out of it.”

And that, finally makes him smile.

It’s not very big, maybe a little forlorn because the doctor keeps staring, and it’s like he’s trying to convey a level of understanding that isn’t exactly clicking yet. It’s slow to process, wonders why words can’t be blunt in the giving, but it’s for his sake, if anything.

Steve realizes – should be common sense, maybe - that Billy’s body has been under so much strain, that there’s a good possibility he won’t entirely be who he was before. Though only in the sense that this could’ve been worse, that this could still go south- “He’ll be out of work for a long time,” is a comment he hears, and Steve realizes exactly what that means. Realizes exactly what this man is telling him.

Billy will heal, and he’ll be fine, but his body might protest and smart at any sudden movements. He may need physical therapy, and there’s a good chance he may not ever return to the one thing Steve knows Billy loves. “Take me to him,” Steve says, pushing everything back on the promise of later, to crossing a crumbling bridge when he gets there.

He’d wanted to know, and he thinks this is a fine compromise considering death had been in the realm of possibility, but breaking Billy’s heart like Steve’s almost had been tonight, is another option he hadn’t wanted to consider.

Just before he leaves, he turns back to the men in the room. Everyone still looks tired, but there’s relief there, too. Steve smiles at them all, and he says, “I’ll call you with updates. Please get some rest.” And he follows the doctor only a few steps before pausing, turning, biting his lip as he finishes with, “Thank you for everything.”

It’s not a permanent goodbye; they all know this, but Steve owes them regardless for what they’ve done for him, for Billy. He’s greeted with genuine, albeit tired smiles, one last understanding nod from the chief, before he’s off down the hall. Down another path of mixed emotions and fragility from every end of the spectrum.

+ +

When Steve enters the room, he goes in with no expectations. Sure, he expects more white walls and basic furnishings, but he doesn't even try to pretend to guess what he'll be met with. Partially, Steve doesn't want to deal with shock, nor does he want to startle Billy from the tears Steve knows will come at some point during their stay.

Billy's asleep when he walks in, chest rising and falling. He looks peaceful, just as he does when he's off shift and Steve has those few days to bask in Billy's beauty, in his sly grins and cheeky demeanor. The worry lines are gone from his face, hair splayed across the pillow, and Steve takes a seat by the bed, the closest he can get without disturbing his boyfriend.

From here, Steve doesn't know what to do. He's sure as shit not going to wake Billy, let him know that he's here and that he's not gonna go anywhere if he doesn't want him to. Steve's also not going to drown himself in pity because he knows without a shadow of a doubt that Billy would not take kindly to such a notion.

So, Steve stares- well, he takes in Billy's form as best as he can, looks over his face where there's a cut across his temple, stitched into place by black thread. There's a cut on Billy's lower lip, and a superficial cut on his cheek, but that's all Steve can see. Though as his eyes trail lower, he comes across the white bandaging the encases a large part of Billy's left side, up to his jaw and around part of his neck.

It's covering burn marks.

Steve sucks in a breath, then releases it, feels the way air expands his lungs and leaves just as quickly. He's not going to lose it. Not here, not when Billy could wake at any moment. He's alive, for fuck's sake, breathing and gentle, and Steve reaches out for his hand just to hold onto something for the sake of his sanity.

"You're real cute when you're worried."

Steve jumps, but he doesn't let go of Billy's hand. His fingers ghost over Steve's, squeezing them tight as he shifts just the slightest in bed. "You scared me, asshole," Steve whispers because that feels most

appropriate. It's still the middle of the night, and he doubts his voice will carry, but there's delicacy he doesn't want to break.

Billy tries to smirk, but it comes across as a lazy, half-hearted grin. "Couldn't resist. You look good."

He doesn't. Steve's in pajamas and a heavy coat because it's cold outside. He's wearing tennis shoes, and his hair's a mess because he'd showered before bed and hadn't planned on leaving it before his alarm went off the next morning. But Billy's looking at him, a little hazy in the eyes, but he's drinking Steve in like he hasn't seen him in months, and it makes him shiver like the chill's found its way inside. "No better than you," Steve tries, but the joke falls flat even on his own tongue.

Billy doesn't seem to care or even notice the attempt. Or maybe he does, and that's exactly why he keeps on smiling. "I'll be fine."

"Yes," Steve agrees, lets the sarcasm shine with a roll of his eyes. "Thank god for that."

This time is the round that Billy realizes that Steve's actually annoyed. Hardly slow on the uptake, it must be the drugs, the IV carefully inserted into the back of Billy's hand that Steve's avoided touching. "You're worrin'"

Steve scoffs, affronted that he'd feel anything less than that after the past few hours. "How could I not?" he asks, indignation running on what little adrenaline Steve has left in his body. "I get a call in the middle of the night telling me my boyfriend's been admitted," Steve leans in, presses his elbows into the mattress and uses that as an anchor, "didn't even know if you were dead."

It's such a slow movement, Steve would laugh if it weren't appropriate, when Billy furrows his brow in confusion. "S'gonna take a lot more than a fire to take me down, Harrington."

Even though he bites his tongue to stave off what he wants to say, uses the bounce of his foot as leverage to burn off ire in his chest, it doesn't work. Steve seethes, really, not *at* Billy but at their situation – at Billy's situation. "Fuck you, okay?" He squeezes Billy's hand, lets

go real quick because he doesn't want to cause any pain due to the ball of emotion stuck in his fucking throat. "Fuck," he whispers, long and drawn out. "I'm so mad."

Whether he is or isn't, isn't the point. All Steve knows is that he's wrestling with a lot right now. Steve's always been a fixer, knows when something is broken and needs fixing, placing the puzzle pieces back together again because he's good at solving problems. But as he's gone on in his life, he'd been quick to learn that some things shouldn't be fixed while others simply can't because he wants it to.

That doesn't mean he's never going to try.

"You're not." Billy's voice is soft, shifts his hand until his pinky is brushing the back of Steve's.

"I might as well be," he admits, deflating because of Billy's touch. Even in his rugged condition, Billy still pulls Steve away from the edge, draws him in like the rising tide and calms his soul in a way that Steve realizes he's missed way too much. "I saw the fire; they showed it on the news, and you could've-

He catches himself before he says it. Had been thinking of it long before he'd found out the truth of Billy's condition because it *had* been a possibility. Fires were dangerous. Fires in Chicago were *extra* dangerous, and they both knew that when Billy told him he wasn't giving it up because it'd been what he wanted since he was a kid. Steve sure as shit wasn't going to take that away from him, but to say the decision he'd made was easy would be nothing more than a lie.

"Steve," Billy whispers, catching his eye in the dim light of the room. It's just an overhead lamp, muting the hideous colors that would've found Steve's eye if he'd been paying more attention to his surroundings. His only thoughts had been of Billy, and rightfully so because the rest of his place didn't matter. The boy in bed did.

"I'm glad you're not dead," he eventually says, follows Billy's whisper. He didn't want to say it aloud, but then again, it didn't feel like a choice. The truth is important to Steve, and Billy's heard worse confessions over the course of the months they've been dating.

Billy's fingers finally encircle Steve's, catching his hand only to turn it until his palm faces up. "I'm definitely glad I'm not dead." At first, Billy's fingers tap against his skin, slow and languid until he runs out of beats his sluggish brain makes up. Then, it's tracing, carefully crafted lines soothing Steve's nerves, ran across every line and every crease.

"Can't wait to get you home now," Steve says in reply, knows it'll be a few days before that happens, even though he knows that Billy will be taken care of here. What he really wants for the two of them is to be in their bed, warm and safe from the dreary weather, away from smoke and fire licking up the walls of derelict buildings. "I hate that you're in here."

"You're going to mother me, aren't you?"

Steve scoffs, face twisting into offense until he realizes that Billy's eyes are full of mirth rather than pain, and Steve will gladly take that any day of the week. "I- I'm going to take care of you," he reasons, as if that's any different.

"So that's a yes." Billy lifts a brow, amused but with no complaints.

"For fuck's sake. You'll be difficult, won't you?"

"M'definitely not difficult. Sweet as pie."

"Sure you are," Steve drawls, could think of numerous times when that hasn't been the case. But they're fine now, and it's small talk, and he realizes that even if Billy doesn't realize it, he's done Steve a solid by simply talking. Billy's always been a distraction - be it his vernacular or his looks - but what he often doesn't realize is just how easy it is for him to shift the focus elsewhere, both a tactic used for good and bad. In this case, Steve's chest doesn't feel so tight anymore, thinks how unfair it is that Billy doesn't even have to try to be good at much.

Everything just comes so natural.

The lull brings a stark contrast to the night's events, and as Steve's eyes flutter over Billy, he realizes he's dozing. Wonders how much

effort it took Billy to fight off sleep just to indulge Steve before he lost. It warms his heart, fills it right to the brim, and as Steve finally lets his thoughts wind down, that's when Billy speaks again.

He keeps his eyes closed, but he tugs on Steve's hand. "Lay with me, Steve," he says.

"That's not the best idea," Steve says, conflicted, even if he'd really like to join Billy. Sleeping in a chair all night won't do him any favors, but he's not about to have Billy move for his sake. "I'm not going to hurt you."

This time, Billy does crack an eye open, carefully calculating his words so they're as convincing as ever. "I'm all doped up," he replies with a whisper, like he's telling a secret and grinning to himself because he's found a loophole the hospital can't do anything about. "Won't feel a thing."

The offer is tempting, so very tempting given Steve had been pulled from his bed earlier. Exhaustion hasn't set in yet, but he knows it's well on its way, and Steve's always had little to no reason for self-restraint when it comes to Billy's enticing demands.

Really, it only takes a matter of seconds before all protest dies from his tongue, and Steve carefully shuffles to the other side of the bed so he can climb in right next to Billy without jostling him. It's a success, and he's missed the heavy weight of Billy's arm that settles around his middle. "You worried me, you know?"

Steve's not under the covers, but that's okay because his jacket makes up for the lack of warmth. He buries his nose into the crook of Billy's neck, careful and sleepy like their roles are reversed. Steve holds Billy's hand again, determined not to let go, likes the way the warmth of his body sinks into his.

"I know," Billy says, breath hot against Steve's forehead. "I said you looked cute because of it."

Clicking his tongue, Steve admonishes him. "Be serious."

"As much as I can be."

“Right,” Steve says, not wanting to feel like an ass by taking away the one thing they both could use. Billy, in all honesty, seems to be doing fine, though Steve knows that acting and feeling are two different things, and Billy likes to hide when he thinks he can get away with it. When he thinks Steve won’t notice that something is on his mind, when something is burying itself under his chest, ready to explode. Those are usually the moments that Steve tells him to just *talk to me, please*.

Which is how he knows that there will be more discussions about this, about where this leaves them- if it leaves them anywhere at all, not about their relationship but what this means for Billy and the damage his body has inflicted. Steve knows he’ll heal; the doctor spoke as if he’d had full confidence in that, but it didn’t mean there wouldn’t be a transition period where Billy stared back at someone different than who he was before.

Steve knows that as soon as Billy’s healed, he’s going to kiss every inch of skin he can get his hands on.

“I thought it was *the* call, you know?” he says, not afraid of expressing the fear that had woken him up. He’s grateful for that, at least, but wonders how this’ll affect him now. If the insomnia will return or if he’ll settle back into his normal routine. “And that scared me, terrified me really.”

“I couldn’t just leave someone-”

Steve makes a noise of protest, lifts his head far enough to look Billy in the eyes. “I’m not asking you to apologize for that, Billy.” And he means it; Steve can be upset all he wants, but he’d never require Billy’s feigned regret over a career he’s proud of. “You were doing your job,” he explains. “but I won’t lie and say it doesn’t keep me up at night sometimes.” Of course, it’s gotten better. Like tonight, Steve had fallen asleep without Billy, without medicine, without anything to forcefully drag him under because finding peace had been the key to end whatever horror that’d kept him up years prior. Now, he might have to find it all over again, but at least he has a referenced starting point.

Eventually, Steve settles back down, feels Billy’s breath even out, and

he thinks he's finally drifted off to sleep until he feels the palm of Billy's hand tighten around his hip. "I'm glad you're here," he says, voice full of sleep, dripping with the fight to stay awake for as long as he can.

"There's no place I'd rather be," Steve says instead of *go to sleep*, instead of *I'll be here*. They're profound in the middle of the night, feel solid and right, and Steve feels the tug of a smile against his temple.

"Even with all this?" Billy says, slightly slurred. He attempts to shrug his hurt shoulder, but it doesn't really move, and Steve's thankful for that because he can't imagine the real pain masked by whatever drug they've got Billy under.

So, Steve pulls back again, finds Billy's mouth with his own just to kiss him deeply and says, "They aren't going to change a thing."

Because they're not, and Billy hums under his breath with satisfaction until Steve settles against him again. This time, Steve doesn't expect a reply nor does he say anything more. They're conversations for another day.

He hears it more than sees it the moment Billy finally knocks out. That brings him peace, and Steve, fortunately, falls right behind him.